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# LOCKE ON SUBSTANCE

*(Part 1 of 2)*

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Text source:

*Essay Concerning Human  
Understanding*, bk. 2 ch. 23

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# PROPERTIES (a.k.a. QUALITIES) AND SUBSTANCES

- We think of the world as populated by **properties** (a.k.a. **qualities**).
    - (Shapes, sizes, colors, odors, the power of magnetic attraction, etc [Recall: PQs, SQs, TQs...])
  - But we also think of the world as populated by **the things that have properties**.
    - We don't just say that there are the *properties* of furriness, four-leggedness, and a tendency to purr are in the room. We say 'A cat is in the room': A *thing* that *has properties* is in the room.
  - Locke's account of **substance** is an attempt to analyze this component of our thinking: our thought about what it is to be a thing.
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## THE TRADITIONAL ACCOUNT OF SUBSTANCE (from Aristotelians and Descartes)

- A '**substance**' is traditionally characterized as an **ultimate subject of qualities**:
    - A subject of qualities that is *not* itself also a quality. (E.g. A dazzlingly bright green **coat**.)
  - This *roughly* correlates with subjects in subject-predicate sentences.
    - E..g 'the dog is wet', 'the piece of chalk is white', 'Lisa Marie has bad taste', 'my mind is thinking of a triangle.'
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# PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT SUBSTANCE

- Substance is a central and much-contested concept in metaphysics. Philosophers argue about...
    - What exactly is substance?
    - What is the relationship between substance and properties?
    - How many different types of substance are there?
      - *(E.g. Immaterial substances? Material substances? Is space a substance? Is God? Etc)*
    - How many individual substances are there?
      - *(E.g. Is each distinct physical body a substance of its own, or are they all parts of one big world substance?)*
  - Locke's approach to this issue is in keeping with his 'epistemological turn': putting the epistemology before the metaphysics.
    - *Where does the idea of substance come from anyway? What is its content or 'cash value'?*
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## “IDEAS OF PARTICULAR SUBSTANCES, HOW MADE”: ECHU 2.23.1

- “The mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of simpler ideas conveyed in by the senses, as they are found in exterior things, or by reflections on its own operations, takes notice also that a number of these simple ideas go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, are called, so united in one subject, by one name ... because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple ideas could subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some **substratum** wherein they do subsist, and from which they result, which therefore we call **substance**.”
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## “NO CLEAR OR DISTINCT IDEA OF SUBSTANCE IN GENERAL” ECHU 2.23.4

- “Hence, when we talk or think of any particular sort of corporeal substances, as horse, stone, etc., though the idea we have of them be but the collection of those several simple ideas of sensible qualities which we use to find united in the thing called horse or stone; yet **because we cannot conceive how they should exist alone, nor in one another**, we suppose them existing in, and supported by, some common subject; which support we denote by the name substance, though it be certain we have no clear or distinct idea of that thing we suppose a support.” ECHU 2.23.4
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## “OUR OBSCURE IDEA OF SUBSTANCE IN GENERAL”: ECHU 2.23.2

- “... if anyone will examine his notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what support of such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us ... The idea then, we have, to which we give the general name substance, being nothing but the supposed, but unknown, support of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist sine re substante, without something to support them, we call that support substantia, which, according to the true import of the word is, in plain English, standing under or upholding.”
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# LOCKE ON SUBSTANCE: HOW WE ARRIVE AT THE IDEA

- Locke thinks that **our ideas of particular substances** are just complex ideas of various properties (furriness, four-leggedness, etc), *plus* the additional supposition of a substratum underlying all these properties and holding them together. (ECHU 2.23.1, 2.23.4, 2.23.6, 2.23.37)
  - The **idea of substance in general** is then the general idea, common to all our ideas of particular substances, of a substratum 'standing under' or 'upholding' the various particular properties. (2.23.2)
    - Locke's driving thought is that we can't conceive of a property existing on its own: this seems a conceptual impossibility. All properties must be the properties of some *thing*.
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# LOCKE'S RESERVATIONS ABOUT SUBSTANCE

- But as Locke provides this account of the origin of our idea of an underlying substratum, there is no mistaking a strong note of skepticism or irony in his reports. (See ECHU 2.23.2; also 2.13.17-20)
  - And of course, since we have no experience of this underlying substratum (we only ever experience the properties of things, not this supposedly underlying substance), it's not obvious how Locke can allow that we have any idea of it whatsoever.
  - *So what does Locke really think about substance?*
  - *And what should we think about it? Can we get the idea from experience? Can we get by without the idea? Does this underlying substance exist? Is it knowable by us? What it is like?*
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